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ABSTRACT

There is a tendency to simply view alternative schools as against tests, grades, bells, seats in rows, and dress regulations. This obscures the need for alternative schools to have stable organizational structures if they are to play an important role in education. There are five stages in the development of an alternative school. They include (a) determining the appropriateness of an alternative school in the particular school system; (b) school board commitment to a formal planning process; (c) description of objectives, characteristics, and resources of the school; (d) operationalization of the school; and (e) continued self-evaluation. Of these stages, the most difficult to achieve is proper planning and operation of the alternative school. This can be aided by examining the issues that require consideration in the planning and operation of a school. First are goals, objectives, and unique characteristics. Second are internal concerns such as curriculum, structure, teachers, and students. Third are external factors such as financing, community relations, and public image. Each of these issues should incorporate evaluation, communication, and decision making. This kind of coordination and structure can make the alternative school, not only a well-organized, on-going process, but can lead to wider use of the alternative school in the education process. (MK)

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ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

A Guide for Practitioners

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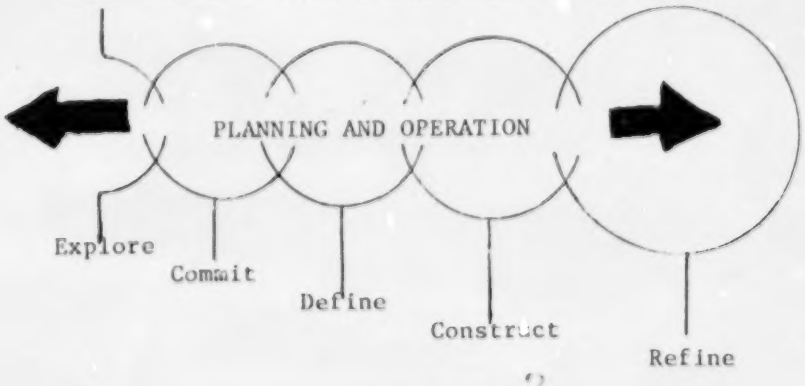
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT:

A Guide for Practitioners

As initiators and former directors of public alternative schools, we have received countless requests for advice and assistance over the past two years. While our personal "school creating" efforts in Marion, Massachusetts and Pasadena, California were bumpy and erratic, they have indeed served as catalysts for other school systems. We do not suggest that they exist as idealized models upon which all of our assumptions and predilections about alternative schools are based. They do provide an action point for validating many of our theoretical notions, however, and complemented by our subsequent research with the National Alternative Schools Program at the University of Massachusetts, they have allowed us to gain a grasp of some of the more sophisticated questions and issues that affect practitioners as they wrestle with the complexities of alternative schooling.

In this intentionally brief "article," we outline, group, and graphically represent major processes, questions, and issues. First, we suggest a simple means for viewing the stages of development in the planning and operations of a public alternative school; second, we present a framework for viewing major issues and concerns; and third, we propose that by providing structure the alternative school will acquire the freedom to succeed.

Action Stages of Alternative School Development



The preceding representation of stages in the development of an alternative school may lend clarity and direction to the developmental process. Educators should neither be overwhelmed by the sense of totality projected, nor be tempted to overlook particular parts of the process as a short-cutting approach. Although the stages presented are not, in all cases, sequential, the intent here is to convey the importance of continued on-going planning, even through the operational phases of the school. The stages define themselves as follows:

1. Explore. The beginning step is an exploration of the idea -- determining whether an alternative school is appropriate for the system. This is the stage for initial investigation -- exploring the purposes and disadvantages of an alternative school through conferences, readings, visitations and discussions with alternative school personnel, and meetings with a cross-section of the educational community, particularly people from other local schools.

2. Commit. Stage two requires school board commitment to a formal planning process and to the ultimate operation of an alternative school. In real terms this means a commitment to: (1) funding, (2) open, system-wide self-examination of needs and problems, (3) the endorsement of selected alternative school principles and (4) the formation of a group responsible for developing a plan for implementation. It is now that the skeletal ground rules are set for what the school will be, based upon substantial feedback from within the system. Only extraordinary circumstances should terminate this commitment.

3. Define. At this time, the objectives, characteristics, and resources of the school are described. A formal plan of operation is drawn,

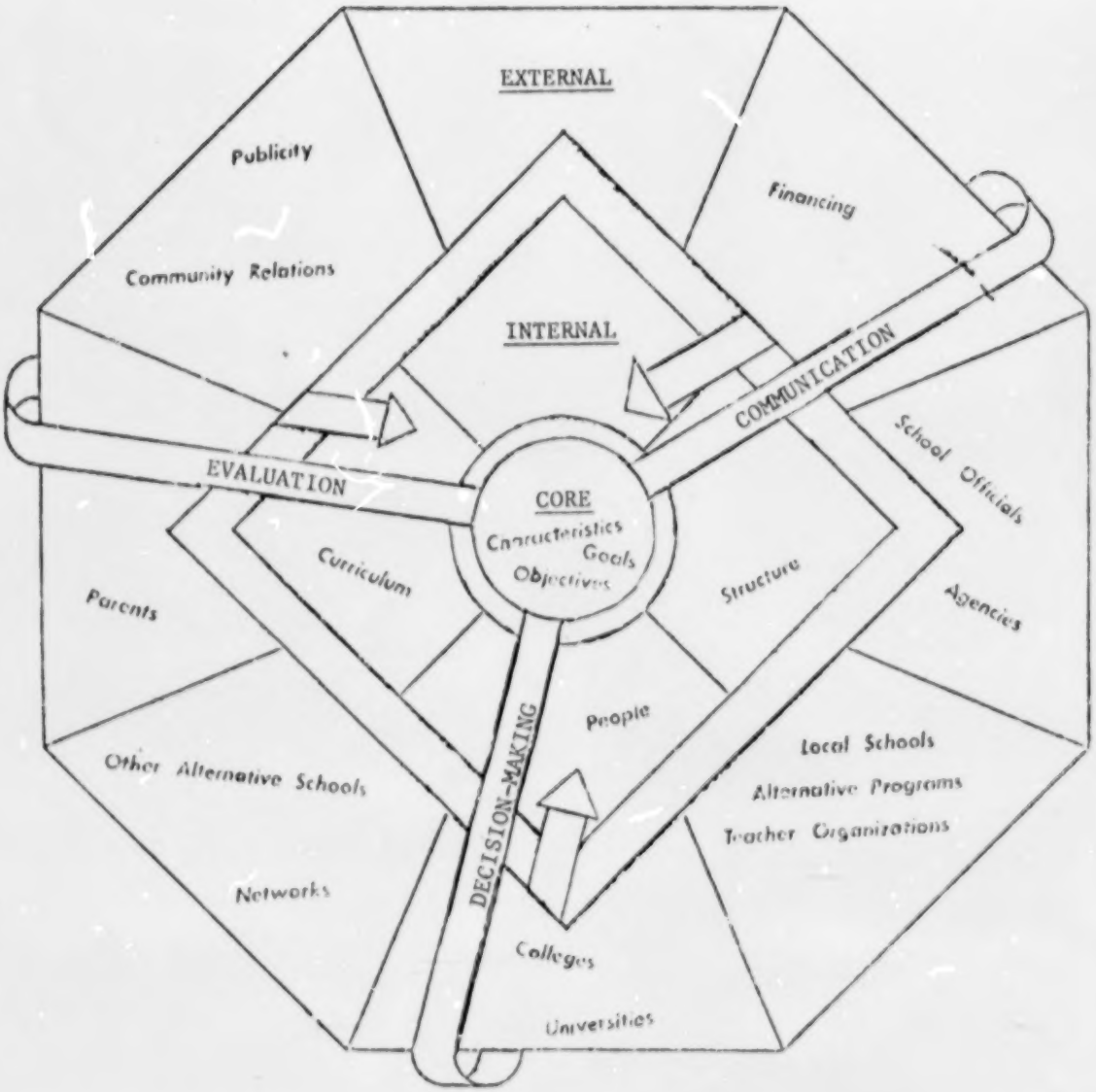
mandates established, and roles defined taking into account the concerns elaborated in the outline section below.

4. Construct. The school itself becomes operational in accord with the definitions provided at stage three. A sense of constructive evolution, of continued planning and "in-flight corrections" mark this stage with direct accountability to those who have volunteered for the alternative.

5. Refine. Stage five represents the need for continued self-reflection -- of critical and comprehensive review of both the "definitions" (objectives) and the "construct" (actual operations.) Refinement will necessarily be ongoing but may also entail a periodic hiatus from normal operations for modification purposes.

AN OUTLINE OF THE ISSUES AND CONCERNS RELATIVE TO ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Having expressed a view of the developmental process of an alternative school, we introduce the actual concerns and issues that require consideration both in planning and operating a school. They can be most easily visualized in the following diagram.



The basic components of this diagram include:

Goals, objectives, and unique characteristics form the basis of an ongoing evaluation, communication, and decision making. The objectives are specific statements of the purposes of the program. Evaluation is defined as "data for decision makers" that feeds back on both the internal and external program. Communication is the information system and public relations which generate and pass on data. Decision making is the method by which communicated evaluation actually influences progress.

Internal concerns are those issues and considerations which most directly affect the inside workings of the school. Curriculum, people and structure are viewed as the primary internal factors of school organizations. "People" includes not only staffing but the unique student, parental and community roles that are often raised within alternative schools.

External concerns are those issues and considerations which lie outside of daily school operations but which may significantly influence the ultimate definitions, construct and eventual survival of the school.

While this diagram may suggest clear-cut bounds between specific concerns, it should be emphasized that neither the issues, nor the groupings that follow can be neatly compartmentalized and separated in practice. There are continual blurs and juxtapositions that are as unique as the schools themselves and their particular evolutions. With that probability noted, we outline the following questions which we feel provide a sense of totality of the concerns involved in creating an alternative school.

Goals, objectives and characteristics

Summary statements will be needed for assessing the progress of the schools, for internal and external understanding of what is going on, and for clear and productive management or decision making. The statements will be further refined in the internal and external considerations.

What is the purpose of the alternative school?

> Although goals will be continually revised, it must have some clear intent at all times which has been agreed upon by all decision makers. The purpose should be to do something, not not to do something.

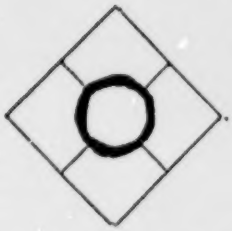
How does the school intend to achieve its purposes?

> If the school, for instance, intends to provide students with opportunities to make decisions, how will this be done?

If the school intends to continue basic skill development, how will this be done? Will these two objectives be compatible?

What will make this school an alternative?

Will its difference be its staffing patterns? its student grouping plan? its use of community facilities? its calendar and scheduling? its student selection? its evaluation design?



Internal concerns

Who are the people involved in the school and what do they do?

Students

What is the age range, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic mix, ability and number of students who will make up the school? How will they be selected? By lottery with predetermined quotas to meet the criteria established? Will students function as teachers and decision makers as well as learners?

Staff

What will be the criteria for the staff? Will competency in a particular area, ethnicity, sense of humor, tolerance for long hours, ability to work with others, appreciation of school and system demands, and personal values be considered? Who will select the staff? How will the staff become a team? How will part-time and volunteer "staff" receive orientation and training from the team? What kind of leadership and direction is desired? Will the staff be differentiated? How will program decisions be made? How will staff be evaluated? How will they account for student progress? Will staff have planning and recuperation time to combat "burnout"?

Parents

What will be the parents' role in governance, service, planning, communication, teaching and learning?

What will the curriculum look like?

Will the school break away from and redefine some conventional curricula, and continue other traditional curricula when it is appropriate to the objectives? How will it address the question of "basic skills"? Will the curriculum be integrated? By theme? By serendipity? Will new curriculum resources be used? Will the school teach values, personal growth and interpersonal relations? How will the community be utilized. How will the curriculum be subjected to continual assessment and re-creation?

How will the organization of the school be structured?

The Place

What kind of site is needed and what other facilities will be used? How will the space be arranged? Will there be quiet spaces, active spaces, big spaces, small spaces? How will the school acquire materials and equipment?

Transportation

If students and teachers are going outside of the building, how do they get there? How do students get to school in the first place?

Scheduling

How will the school use time? The year? the week? the day? How will learning experiences be scheduled to meet a variety of needs - randomness, spontaneity, structure, continuity? How will the schedule be communicated to staff, students and others? How will internal movement be facilitated?

Governance

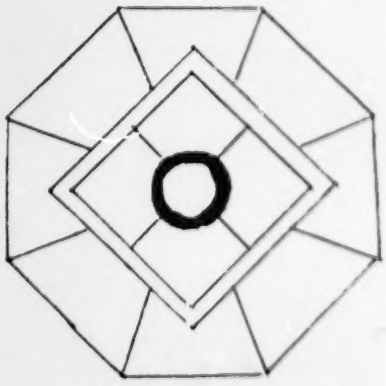
Who makes the decisions about what? What will be the expectations of students? of staff? What rules and regulations will there be? How will they be enforced?

Accountability

Will there be written documentation, transcripts, reporting systems, parent conferences, student feedback? Will students be graded? tested? Will advisory system be created? What is the desired relationship of students and teachers? of teachers and parents?

Grouping

How will students be grouped? by interest? by age? by competence? by advisory groups? by multi age families? by accident?



External concerns

How will the school relate to the public? Will it project a positive public image? How will the program be made clear? How will volunteers and community resources be used? What will the visiting policy be?

What will the school cost? Does the "same per-pupil cost" idea really hold water? How is it implemented? Are outside funds needed to cover planning, start up and training? How are operational costs determined and then budgeted?

How will parents be involved in the school? Will there be meetings? newsletters, committees?

How will district school officials be involved? Will there be a special liason board member? Will principals and central office people be invited to participate? Will they meet at any time to discuss the school? Will the school have special privilege or autonomy? Will the teachers' association, union and state education agencies be informed regularly about the school? Will state and district requirements be discussed? How will the board and superintendent be helped to assess the progress of the school?

Will teachers from other schools participate from time to time? How will other innovative programs be viewed by the alternative school? Will alternative school staff visit other schools?

Can the alternative school receive help from other alternative schools; school networks, or regional agencies?

In what ways can colleges and universities be involved? Can they provide personnel? staff development? credibility?

In addressing their concerns, it is suggested that a simple "test of completeness" might be used in order to determine both missing variables as well as the critical questions that relate to each specific issue. We have found that at each stage and for each concern the "Journalistic questioning" format is helpful. For example, in the area of staff development, we would ask:

Who will be involved as participants and trainers?

When is staff development most appropriate?

Where will/should it take place?

Why is staff development necessary? objectives?

What forms of staff development will be used?

How will staff development be handled/implemented?

Structuring The School So That

It Is Free To Operate

In summary, our intent is to show that developing an alternative school need not be, indeed should not be, an emotional anti-school "happening." To achieve success and survival explicit structuring can take place throughout the overlapping planning and operational stages.

Equally important as the stability which structure will provide is the evaluation and communication system which will result. Until the alternative school has clearly defined its intent, its content and its methods of procedure, it will continue to be judged by the expectations of others. Some of these expectations will be impossibly romantic and others will be inconsistently "old school." Defending the alternative school on the basis that it is against tests, bells, seats in rows, P.R., grades and dress codes does not provide answers for people who need to know how the school is doing and who want to know how they can be of help.

If our experience has shown us anything, it has shown us that others really want the school to be successful, but that the alternative school itself has held off that support by building a shell of fuzzy rhetoric, defensive public action and belligerent internal interaction. We feel that added structure starting with the conception of an alternative school will make the school more confident, more committed and more receptive in response to questions and criticisms of its constituency and the wider system of which it is an important member.